

1996

## Paper boat

Chao

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# Edith Cowan University

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# PAPER BOAT

by  
CHAO

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TO

my dearest wife Ah Fen and our only son Yiyi

We are brought down to the dust;  
our bodies cling to the ground.  
Rise up and help us;  
redeem us because of your unfailing love.

Ps. 44: 26, 27

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CHAO



The following poems were first published in **Chariton Review**, **Paintbrush**, **Sou'westerly**, **Asian Poets** and **Out of Chaos**, 1995: *A Little Paper Boat*, *Grown Up*, *The Poet in Spring*, *An Elderly Bachelor*, *Metropolitan*, *Morning*.

## PREFACE FOR PAPER BOAT

I cannot hope to convey how delighted I am to be given the privilege of addressing the reader of this unique collection of poems. For five years since I met the extraordinary young Chinese poet, Chao, I have been impatiently awaiting the Australian publication of his work.

In 1990 I was on a sabbatical exchange at the Guangdong Foreign Studies University in South China. Only a few days after I had been installed in the so-called Foreign Experts Building in the leafy campus on the slopes of White Cloud Mountain, near Guangzhou, I heard a soft knock at my fourth-floor door. My visitor, a slim but vibrant figure, was Chao, then a member of the French Department at the University. He announced that he was excited to hear there was an Australian poet on campus. Our friendship blossomed from that moment and each of us found the other's poetry intensely interesting. We exchanged our newest poems, almost daily; we explored Australian and Chinese contemporary poetry, we met with local poets, and we organised a number of public readings at which audiences, mainly students, responded very strongly.

Back in those times, my initial delight in reading Chao's poetry had been heightened by the discovery that he wrote directly in his third language, English (as well as in Chinese and French). The poems in *Paper Boat*, his latest book, provide extraordinary evidence of his ability to perform this feat. Only a select group of writers has such a powerful poetic impulse that it shines as an unquenchable flame in their poetry no matter in which language they choose to write. Chao is such a poet:

### CHINESE BLACK (for Gu Cheng)

black  
the colour of our eyes  
the colour of our night

in it  
only in it  
am I destined  
to witness light

Yet in his newest poems, especially those responding to Australia, the first overseas country Chao has visited, we find the imagery equally apposite, equally intense, equally controlled:

### AUSTRALIAN NIGHT

an enormously long granite table just placed  
under the moon-flower decked veranda splendoured  
with contemporary limelight and ancient torches

an enormously long granite table just mattressed  
seats them like an audience watching  
fits of wind crossing over time ephemeral and time eternal  
with their shirts and blouses bulging  
appetite alighting

an enormously long granite table just centred  
with gigantic plates of fresh seafood and bricky bread  
bottles of wine white yellow brown and red  
dotted like a blessed game of chess

an enormously long granite table just gleaming  
with forks knives plates glasses clicking  
into frail echoes of sparkling tingling lights

an enormously long granite table  
like the Swan River carrying them far to the tales of night  
the new moon rocking a canoe of cleansed light  
over the billowing Indian Ocean

What living poet would not envy here the quicksilver of ideas, the deftness of word-placements, the inventiveness of imagery?

The three 'parts' into which this volume has been divided show us many sides of the poet's life, as well as scenes of contemporary China. We glimpse, as we turn pages, many faces of China itself: childhood and manhood, cities and open fields, and the changing seasons. And also we have incisive views of our own society in Australia, through a mirror which is at the same time riddling and

revealing. The final poem in the book, "For Sale", is an uncompromising but not undeserved satire directed not just at Perth, but perhaps at all the world's modern cities. Always there is a keen intelligence perceiving, responding, observing, often with a needle sharpness of wit, often with self-effacing shyness. These poems are endearing. We come back to them again and again, like treasured objects:

on to the wall  
I poured  
basin after basin  
yet  
my own shadow  
I could not  
wash off

a chicken  
standing in the rain  
huddling  
on its own  
leg

### (SELF-PORTRAIT)

I sincerely hope the reader is deeply satisfied with the rewards for the pleasant task of having sailed in this 'paper boat'.

GLEN PHILLIPS  
Associate Professor, English,  
Edith Cowan University,  
January 1996.

## CONTENTS

### Part I

Chinese Black .....	3
Birds .....	4
Dutiful Children .....	5
Watching Breast Feeding.....	6
Converts .....	7
Violin .....	8
Generations .....	9
Tale of the Voice.....	10
Leaping Over History .....	11
The Cat and Me.....	13
Siblings.....	14
Child .....	17
Strolling Through the Woods .....	18
Rose Poem.....	19
Record of a Raper .....	20
The Ants and I.....	21
Nostalgia I .....	22

### Part II

Paper Boat.....	24
Self Portrait.....	25
Groaning Creations.....	26
My Pen.....	27
Rainy Night.....	28
Distance .....	29
Death of a Poet .....	30
Crevice .....	31
To T. S. Eliot .....	32
Nervousness .....	33
My Road.....	34
Expression of Life .....	35
Sketching.....	36
Love .....	37
Those Days.....	38
The Head and Me.....	39



Final Glow .....	40
Untitled .....	41
Established .....	42
Only Too Much Garbage .....	43
Otherland .....	44
Undifferentiating .....	45
Being .....	46
Civilization .....	47
An Coucher du Soleil .....	49
The Ant and the Book .....	50

### Part III

Art .....	53
Nostalgia II .....	54
Midnight .....	55
Morning .....	56
The Setting Sun .....	57
Moon Image .....	58
The Stone Lion .....	59
On Hearing of the Suicide of Haizi .....	60
Counselled Professor .....	61
No, I Won't Get Up .....	62
Town .....	63
Looking Towards the Shore .....	64
Death is Two Inches From the Ground .....	65
Poem of a Black Cat and Acknowledgments .....	66
Three Poets .....	68
Letter to Elizabeth Jolley .....	69
In the Land Without a Wife .....	70
Li From Mainland China .....	71
Cockatoos .....	73
Watering .....	74
The Last Night of 1995 .....	75
Personal Religion .....	76
Double Dream at Mount Sinai .....	77
Morning Dream .....	79
Walking Out of the Wound .....	80
Moon-Flower .....	81
In the Hills .....	82
Australian Night .....	83

Grown Up .....	84
Notes .....	85
The Poet in Spring .....	86
An Elderly Bachelor .....	87
Metropolitan .....	88
Notes .....	91
Morning .....	92
Trees by the Road of Guangzhou .....	93
Your Smile is a Temple .....	94
Moon Festival .....	95
Mind in Winter .....	96
For Sale .....	97
Centre .....	98

## Part I

**CHINESE BLACK**  
for Gu Cheng

black  
the colour of our eyes  
the colour of our night

in it  
only in it  
am I destined  
to witness the light

## BIRDS

a confusion of leaves boughs  
sprigs and twigs  
you arise with a shriek  
alighting on a branch  
begin to sing again

you are never frightened  
enough to keep silent  
or be sad

## DUTIFUL CHILDREN

at midnight  
their past parents  
appear in their dream  
they get up  
let off some fireworks  
or burn some ghost money  
made of cheap paper  
then return to sleep  
again with relief  
as if they knew  
their parents  
were satisfied

## WATCHING BREAST FEEDING

brown freckles  
surround  
the breasts

fragrance of milk  
lingers  
in silent suck

I listen  
in hunger

## CONVERTS

at last  
the sun  
sank pressed  
into the dried clefts  
of the land

my farmers  
who were not yet tombstones  
knelt on the field  
ranked like steles  
with their rough hands  
lifted up  
for rain

## VIOLIN

your sobbing violin  
human language  
has forgotten

the moon  
dives mute into the pond  
to grope for the root  
of the grove

## GENERATIONS

we are  
fruit

growing in the air  
without any branch  
branch  
without any trunk  
trunk  
without any root  
root  
without any soil

## TALE OF THE VOICE

for my son

you don't know, my boy?  
your voice now as an elf  
no, as a blind bat  
is wildly hovering  
now has knocked into a tree  
listen, the echo of bumping

now, look  
your voice has dropped down  
faint  
its face must have been  
badly wounded  
black and blue even  
like an almost eaten leaf  
o what pitiful eyes  
hidden in a strangled face!

so, stop shouting, my boy  
or your voice will get shot  
by the bullets of the rain

and its soul will become a wolf  
breaking into your dream  
biting tight your coat  
pulling you backward

o my boy  
stop shouting and confine your voice  
within your own body

## LEAPING OVER HISTORY

my child in my arms  
I watched the water  
overflowing the stone bridge

my childhood  
slowly visualized  
carried on the back  
of my one-year-and-a-half-older  
sister  
was stopped by a flood

booms of thunder  
broke the sky's skull  
one of my sandals  
slipped into the torrent  
was soon washed away

the day was darkened into night  
the fitful lightning  
was our fear  
and only light

I could not cry then  
nor can I now  
for my child is sitting in my arms  
deeply drawn  
to the turbulent din

I could not cry then  
for tears curdled  
huddled in my small mind  
at the thought of souls  
spirits ghosts and devils  
weeping groaning shrieking  
revenging and redressing  
in a world which man can not see  
yet is the watcher  
the judge of man  
(it is what my Grandpa used to say)

my child in my arms  
I leap over the stone bridge  
the chubby hands of my child  
toss up  
dancing with glee

## THE CAT AND ME

when I spotted that cat  
squatting, mewling, infant-like  
in the middle of the road  
it was so late a night  
that the road-lamp  
beamed increasingly bright

I, having passed by  
turned back  
she looked up  
her feminine clarity  
assailed my sight  
her feminine serenity  
caught my mind

I stood there gazing  
she was lonely  
craving without hope  
for delicate hands to gently  
harrow through her furry back

she looked upon me  
I, neither a maid nor less lonely  
felt inarticulate

while she, a cat, sleepless  
out of the soft arms  
wandered in the night  
I, a man, aged eighteen  
began to imagine  
how it would be  
entwined with a sweet virgin  
at this time of night



## SIBLINGS

my twin brother is gone  
who used to sing aloud  
ancient Chinese poems  
his sonorous voice  
striking plucking  
the strings of moonbeams

my twin brother is gone  
who used to stand alone  
in the stubby wheat field  
envisioning all humans  
emerging from the peak  
of flesh and desires

my twin brother is gone  
who used to remember our father  
sitting on the handle of his hoe  
in the shadow of a willow  
his bamboo pipe extending  
from his thick lips  
to the edge of a ditch  
muffled memories channelling  
through puffs of smoke

my twin brother is gone  
who used to recall our mother  
seated in the warm kitchen  
telling tales with her chapped  
wrinkled hands  
webbing weaving hardships  
sufferings into jumpers  
for us to huddle in

my twin brother is gone  
who committed suicide in Beijing  
a place we had dreamt  
of visiting to worship Mao  
since our childhood

my twin brother is gone  
who left a note in his coat  
saying his death has nothing  
to do with anyone or anything  
in this country or  
in this history

my twin brother is gone  
now I am still alive  
like a pair of chopsticks  
with one missing  
like a pair of glasses  
with one cracked  
like a pair of compasses  
with one broken

my twin brother is gone  
I have to survive  
like my grandmother  
when her sister was raped  
then cut open  
by a Japanese soldier

my twin brother is gone  
I have to survive  
like my grandfather  
when his brother was shot  
while both uniformed  
were lying in an ambush  
against the Japanese army

my twin brother is gone  
I must live on like my mother  
when her brother  
was flogged to death  
in the Cultural Revolution

my twin brother is gone  
I must live on like my father  
when his sister  
was starved to death  
in the Great Leap Forward

my twin brother is gone  
I am to live on  
as a single sleeve  
or a single trouser leg  
to exhibit to my children  
what has been  
what was and what is  
in this quasi-world

**CHILD**  
for Pastor Ouyang

night  
the father was reading Matthew  
with his son sitting on his lap  
like a cat

the father was inspired  
and said to his son  
what about playing a game tonight  
the son nodded his head  
wild with delight

the father rose from the sofa  
and moved towards the switch  
the son became alert

as the father lifted his hand  
the son with a burst of crying  
pounced upon his father  
like the sudden  
blackout

the father was touched  
by his son's clutch  
and holding him tightly in his arms  
was enlightened:  
why the Lord asked His disciples  
to humble themselves  
like a little child

## STROLLING THROUGH THE WOODS

two student girls, one in white  
the other in orange  
I saw in my stroll  
through the woods  
sitting in a sunny stubbled clearing  
bent over their books

and raised their heads  
as they sensed my footsteps  
to alertly look at me  
like two timid birds

I really do not know  
why but instinctively  
I lowered my head pretending  
to have been in thought  
arms folded before my chest  
like an owlish philosopher

though at the sight of them  
my face and inside  
blushed immediately  
like a tyro lover

I just do not know  
why I did not lift a finger  
to hi or hello  
or just give a smile  
or a nod

I just do not know  
and now feel sad  
as I realise I might be the source  
of a nightmare  
in this seemingly quiet world

## ROSE POEM for Yolanda

dearest child  
since you asked me to write a poem on rose  
my mind has been dangling all the time  
unable to settle down like a prose

dearest child  
in the adult world  
rose has long become a symbol of love  
always for sale  
cut off from its root and trunk  
wrapped with a filmy plastic

it is no longer a flower  
with an anointing fragrance  
or a fragile life that can year after year  
decorate nature with perfumed grace

dearest child  
now rose to me is but a verb  
the past tense of rise  
showing it was once up  
and might have been down  
or even

past

## RECORD OF A RAPER

he was about to flee  
when she sat up  
saying why not kiss me

he stopped stupefied

yet she hopped up to him  
printed her bloody lips  
on his still sweating cheek  
then flew away  
with a pat on his back

he stood there  
unable to recall  
what had happened

he stood there  
the night washed him  
with wind and dark

and in the end  
he cried

## THE ANTS AND I

I sat on a stone ledge  
about to write  
when some ants  
bee-waisted  
were seen scurrying towards me  
with all their slender feet

I did not want to hurt them  
so, gently flicked them off  
for I was afraid of stinging  
but to my surprise  
they would rush back again  
showing nothing of fear  
as they settled at a distance

one by one I flicked them off again  
yet they would never give up  
as if I were a mountain of food

they helped one another  
so that those fainted  
or turned upside down  
could be prepared to attack again

I was happy and crazy  
happy, they were so loving to each other  
crazy, they were so aggressive to me

in the end I picked up the biggest  
and shouted to it  
can't I share this land with you?  
the ant was shocked

having fallen off my finger  
it squatted on the way  
pushing with its antenna  
all its fellow soldiers away

I looked up at the sky  
touched with awe in my mind's eye

## NOSTALGIA I

nerves drunk  
dangle  
a drop of eyesight  
now dark  
now bright  
like an ember

characters  
dribble down  
hot  
from a candle  
then frozen  
unknown

## Part II

## PAPER BOAT

a white dove  
turning afloat  
on a blurred bluish water

night falls  
a heavy fish net has dropped  
onto the ground —  
hills darken besieging

a small paper boat  
turning afloat  
like a blanched fish  
on blurred blue water

## SELF PORTRAIT

on to the wall I poured  
basin after basin  
yet  
my own shadow  
I could not  
wash off

a chicken  
standing in the rain  
huddling  
on its own

leg

## GROANING CREATIONS

the mountain  
has been pregnant  
without men

the maids  
strive to first  
bare their breasts

the moon pale  
flushes  
with sensual  
trickles

## MY PEN

the rib

taken from my own body  
to wife me company  
in the solitude  
of my one hundred years

## RAINY NIGHT

in the rainy night  
the world is nothing  
but a crushed  
confusion

yet when I listen  
it begins to glisten

## DISTANCE

words  
verses  
or my self

caught  
pulled  
loosening  
unrolling  
like silk vapour  
across the lake

to near  
and cover  
the hills opposite

or  
my self  
in here



## DEATH OF A POET

I came downstairs remembering  
that school of models clotheless  
had died in graceful pose  
their genitals left undone  
barren as modern art

I recollected  
I had been born naked  
and for sale  
they were stripped  
but me a poet a bachelor  
could only earn a living  
by selling my blood  
from my parents  
from my grandparents  
and my great great  
great grandparents

when  
I got that raw profit  
my blood ran out  
my head flower-wilted  
crammed  
with joyous noise of children  
and all concerning me  
and all concerning my family  
became a full stop

my final prayer voiceless  
was imaged:  
twigs of willows  
swinging budded  
veins drawn out  
swaying with death

## CREVICE

gaze becomes heavier  
a millstone chestbound  
expanding

ice of light flowing  
anchoring down  
merging with water  
afloat in the air

like a beast  
lust wriggles

consequently  
something flushes out of eyes  
as if to shed tears

telepathically  
you change your pose  
head bending down  
more like Venus

the glass  
before your breasts  
thins to a crevice

passion  
once stirred up  
throws up everything  
flesh as trash

## TO T.S. ELIOT

draw out a few books at random  
from the attic of your brain  
to make up a scene a being a poem

or just let go a crow  
like a lunatic laughing  
sighing to his phantom

when you staggered  
out of your book-shaped door  
with your pen as a scalpel

all civilisations were threaded  
like a studied human corpse

## NERVOUSNESS

now flees to my hands  
which are soon set to flourish  
in the immediate area

now leaps in my calves  
making my feet turn out  
like Charlie Chaplin

now shoots shivering through my arms  
deprived of strength all my fingers  
which begin to dangle  
like empty gloves

an idea to dance  
flashes in my mind  
but my heart starts to pound  
gripped by the handlebar

my body a door  
of too smooth hinges  
goes open and closed by itself

## MY ROAD

bodies  
tossed in a bus  
flesh bumping into flesh  
bones with bones clashing

thoughts images  
darting flourishing  
prancing swooping  
some vanish swollen  
some topple and fall  
some smash  
splashed into pieces

here like an outsider  
I sit against the window  
with the pulsing shadows  
wondering when my heart  
will calmly emerge  
from the trap of my brain

## EXPRESSION OF LIFE

when I hear the chirps of birds  
crystallised by the morning  
I desire to sketch a tree  
in a way Picasso would do  
a tree lush with leaves  
leaves shaped and noisy  
like hundreds of birds

when night is deadly calm  
I will stare at the drawing  
and think of life  
living in bunches of lights

## SKETCHING

a bundle of grass  
growing among the stones  
strikes me so vehement so sprightly  
that I come to examine carefully  
the location of each stem  
but nothing could be more confusing

either the blades or their shades  
or the variations of their length  
distract my eyes  
and make dizzy my breath

knowing it is hard for me to sketch  
I just murmur on the ledge:  
a bundle of grass appears  
so sprightly with force

that they seem to have sprung up  
in a twinkle of eyes  
their sudden coming up  
that still quivers can be sensed

## LOVE

when he thought of her  
he smashed into the door  
when he thought of her  
he smashed up the floor

whenever he thought of her that day  
he smashed her or something  
until the next morning he woke up  
the house was found so ruined  
without her

## THOSE DAYS

above us  
beamed the mute moon  
as a foil  
to the dark void

and we  
driven by our hunger in emptiness  
ate and ate

one by one  
the plates were eaten  
cold  
and greasy  
as a contrast  
to our warmed  
substantiated  
mind

## THE HEAD AND ME

walking upstairs  
I met and greeted him  
he flashed me a smile  
not knowing my name

he stood above me  
a position of a patron  
I tried to smile back  
but only grinned  
a facial expression  
not easily made or unmade  
but to my surprise  
he managed the same

my head flashed blank

the trees outside the window  
looked green to the sky  
but silent and lonely

## FINAL GLOW

heart abandoned  
maybe still throbbing  
amid such a pack of rusted parts  
as springs and strings

small stones  
keep throwing at a stem of grass  
which trembles violently  
when accidentally hit

the final glow  
by the strip of earth  
dies away  
at the deathly grey water

## UNTITLED

we were talking about God  
he in the corner of the house  
an artist  
burst out laughing  
like a lunatic  
we looked at him quietly  
with a grinning face he said  
if God was here listening  
it is how  
He would be laughing

## ESTABLISHED

the flash of cameras  
now and then  
sliced his vision

he did not move

## "ONLY TOO MUCH GARBAGE"

you said with a smile  
bending down your back and head  
looking for a way to come down

and with the smile  
still on your face  
your right hand still  
in greeting position  
while your left hand  
stretched up backward  
as a sort of balance stick

I was just afraid  
your body or your match-stick  
propped limbs  
might collapse at any time

not until you reached down to me  
did you raise your head  
and the smile was still there  
as newly put on like glee  
exclaiming refreshedly  
"what a beautiful scene  
even if night is falling"

"just because you are too civilized  
have journeyed through  
too much garbage"  
I was to murmur to myself  
but was silenced

## OTHERLAND

jobless  
he came across  
a classmate from his childhood  
in foreign Sydney  
he was wild with joy  
wanted to wake up  
and write a poem about death

he tried to open his eyes  
yet they were a bar of iron  
he tried to turn his head  
yet it was rusted on the ground  
he tried to sit up  
yet could not find his trunk

crawling in a tunnel  
he was an under-river without water  
red misty  
smelling of blood

his classmate asked what are you doing  
he said I come as an exchange  
supposed to teach at a uni  
but it turns out to be no vacancy

the hair of his classmate  
dated from his teenage  
suddenly began to change  
from black to ginger

two Aussie children there  
one girl one boy  
his classmate's pupils  
began to sing London Bridge  
with a cheering voice

he wept underground  
as if listening  
to his national anthem

## UNDIFFERENTIATING

today  
ten years later  
I met you by the Swan River  
waves were tugging  
a net of undifferentiating memories

today  
ten years later  
we met in a foreign land  
marvelling at an exotic landscape  
thinking in mind of settling down  
the lawn was pulling long a tree shadow

today  
ten years later  
we stood in the depth of being  
white seagulls were staring up at us  
with their small blood-ringed eyes  
you concerned for your tomorrow did not notice  
and I directed my eyes up  
at the alien but pure blue sky



## BEING

chased  
by a ghost  
I shot through  
doorafterdoor  
with horror  
HO-  
llowing,  
Echo-  
ing  
in the dark  
corridor  
until I fell over  
awakened on the soil  
that man lives  
always pursued

by death

then  
everythingwasstill  
dumbdeaf  
asbefore

## CIVILIZATION

for the foreign teachers  
of my campus

"hey, listen!  
the frogs have stopped"  
alertly she slows down  
her head poses askew  
lips tightly sealed

outside the window  
it is dark and static  
the whole world  
is nerve-tied by her listening

"last year" finally she spoke up  
"a French teacher almost went mad"  
her voice sounding forced  
"and he had to leave"  
spontaneously she stands up  
steps to the window  
and then abruptly turns back  
her mouth gaping  
hands cupped before  
eyes appalled

I sense a cold breath  
and become tense  
thinking she must have seen  
a burglar or a murderer  
"anything wrong?" I pretend boldly  
my head stretching curled

"I feel the pond down there"  
after a long pause she stammers  
"is filled with frogs"  
they are to croak with a start  
at any time they feel  
they are being watched"  
every word is squeezed out  
from her flat jaws

I really wish to laugh  
but was once told it is rough  
and luckily have recalled  
what my friend remarked:  
all westerners are just born  
actors and actresses  
and it shows a higher degree  
of being civilized  
and now I cannot but agree

## AU COUCHER DU SOLEIL

with a poem  
to stay the cooling of the sun  
at the top  
of the mountain

a bugle  
bubbles afar

the moon  
quiet  
up in the sky

with a poem  
to sing departures  
of a heart

the mood  
of a still life

## THE ANT AND THE BOOK

an ant is crawling  
upon my open book  
fully covered with characters  
shiny and sticky  
as not yet dried ink  
so that every step of the ant  
resembles a struggle  
a clambering for its fine feet

now look  
it has again stopped  
nothing is moving but its antennae  
like the ends of straw or grass  
left outside the chewing mouth  
of a thinking ox  
or like the nerves in reading  
of a blindman's fingers

yet never could you suspect  
when the ant finally moves away  
a hole has been bored  
in the character 'book'  
and that it is I  
instead of the word  
who have suffered the tiny pain  
of being pierced

## Part III

## ART

a flag weltering in blood  
flounders  
beats  
twists  
like any beast

art crouching aside  
barks  
barks  
the howl  
of any hound  
or sound

## NOSTALGIA II

sleepless  
I sat up by Lake Monger

a violent wind  
tossed up  
a troop of seagulls

pieces of lost white  
wrote  
a skyful of cries

all the long necks  
of black swans  
were twisted  
upon the crumbled  
water

a sharp pain  
crackled in my brain  
as if the root  
of my nostalgia  
was to be pulled up  
like my hair

## MIDNIGHT

a bang of the door  
I turned back  
nobody was there

my shadow started up  
shrouded  
then with a flop  
fell  
face down  
on to the floor

## MORNING

remnants of dreams  
raked out  
by trills of birds

until my soul  
wakes up  
clear and clean  
as morning

## THE SETTING SUN

the bare passion  
comes slowly  
col-

d

then  
hung upside down  
from a bony branch  
peering  
at the  
worl-

d

## MOON IMAGE

when the desert face  
shines innocence  
the whole world  
becomes night  
and mute

## THE STONE LION

for my grandfather

though carved by you  
I could not shed a tear at your death  
nor could I tread on this raised paw  
to attend your funeral  
or to resume your last step

who am I  
meditating here?  
nothing but a stone  
standing trapped on a block  
my ancestry my descent  
and my only foothold

and now night has fallen  
shrouded every road  
it is nothing to those homeless  
as I

yet who am I  
with this leg pretending to step  
yet have never set off  
though I have stepped over generations?

for whom am I poised  
walking?

# ON HEARING OF THE SUICIDE OF HAIZI

"our friend Haizi committed suicide  
by lying on the railway at Shan Hai Guan"  
letter from Xichuan, 1989

the braking shrieks of despair  
stop and incline  
heart flinging out  
hit  
bouncing back  
tears flopping within —

where you arise  
my brother and stranger  
in the depth faint and sick  
standing stunned  
by the railway track  
your hair in the wind  
blazing black

history  
that rumbles by  
like the train  
could cut off your body  
but not  
your soul

# COUNSELLED PROFESSOR

he walked in sideways  
looking sideways  
just at my loose dogeared  
dictionaries  
or dictionary-like books  
which were piled up paralysed  
before me  
with my shed hairs  
protruding from between  
like bookmarks

they were all my pride

yet without addressing me  
he turned back  
hurried straight out  
with an achieved or released smile



## NO, I WON'T GET UP

no, I won't get up  
I'm waiting for the dream  
to again play me the poem  
as it appeared line by line  
on the screen

no voice was heard  
it moved mute this time  
as in mourning  
from down to above  
like the souls of the poets  
who had committed suicide

I was watching  
repressing my legs stiffening  
I knew it was a long poem  
I knew it was a great poem

but they kept moving up  
deaf to my pounding heart  
I could not stop  
as those brother poets in grief  
one by one had vanished  
from this world

oh, don't disturb me any more  
I need nothing  
but a dream and a poem  
the spirit of my dead friends  
at this helpless time  
in the awaking morning

## TOWN

the china Buddha  
seated by the road  
behind empty cups  
sipping  
its glassy  
purity

LOOKING TOWARDS THE SHORE  
for Glen

the land a huge raft stagnant  
deep  
sunk

knowing not  
where to take,  
all those buildings  
cars  
creatures  
and wisdoms

"DEATH IS TWO INCHES FROM THE GROUND"

her two fingers  
U-shaped squeezing before my eyes  
looked so forceful  
as likely to narrow  
a little bit more

"anyhow  
whenever your two walking feet  
fail to touch this ground"  
(she trod hers with a thud  
accordingly her hand flopped palm down  
onto the table  
a muffled slap)

"then you become a shadow  
darkened windy hollow  
amplified there in the window"  
(her thumb pointed beyond my shoulder  
white foam flapped  
at the corners of her mouth)

I was amazed by her metaphor  
and subconsciously looked back  
saw a raven black  
standing there on the sill

"death is only a hair thin and away"  
she stressed painfully  
"from this ground"  
her hand suddenly shook into my sight  
a hair magically appeared  
between her two fingers  
being twiddled

## POEM OF A BLACK CAT AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

a flash of a black cat  
my black ink decisively  
catches  
and it soon becomes alive  
standing in the garden  
stretching stiff its black tail  
eyes piercing  
startling part of my inside  
like a shadow

in the interlapping  
flux of my thought  
my black pen has resolutely  
chosen to grab  
a pure black cat  
and immediately  
I myself have become alive

now is night  
the black of a black cat  
should matter less  
yet to my surprise  
it has been clawed  
by my thought

which is drifting  
in the daytime  
there I cannot see much  
striking me alive  
except the black cat  
from the neighbour  
stealing into the garden  
seeking company  
or a gentle pat

I must thank my black pen  
for its decisive act  
to have written down

a black cat  
and changed or directed  
the life of my tonight

I must also thank  
that pure black cat  
though it first appeared  
in the morning  
as my fright

my thanks also go  
to the quiet of tonight  
which generously allows me  
to be exclusively involved  
with a black cat  
the vagabond or fugitive  
of daylight  
from the land

of black

### THREE POETS

three poets sit by the Swan River  
having a barbecue

three poets talk about politics  
chewing their steaks

three poets  
wear three pairs of sunglasses

the river looks up at them  
with a mind of the Indian Ocean

three poets  
like three Chinese fortune-tellers  
are three blind men

### LETTER TO ELIZABETH JOLLEY

dear Elizabeth  
when I returned from Mandurah last night  
saw your letter on my desk  
I read it a couple of times in one breath  
silently and noisily to myself

and later woke up in a dream:  
a cock was brooding on a blank paper  
its claws turned into a pen in my hand  
yet nothing but scribbles was seen on my mind

dear Elizabeth  
this morning I read your letter  
a few more times  
some lines were imaged in my brain  
on my way to Mount Lawley Campus  
some lines were murmuring in my head  
on the way back  
where a car shot by  
startled my soul into flight

looking up at the sky I felt thankful  
as if I had begotten a new life

## IN THE LAND WITHOUT A WIFE

without a wife  
moustache beard whiskers sprout up like grass  
as in jail

time strides by  
tramping scrunching a salt-bleached crust  
I  
cannot cr---y

wires nerves strung cutting into stumps  
sustaining a series of crosses  
fencing private properties  
my  
cr---y is dr---y

vast expanses of wheat belt yellow  
golden as my passion  
are gawped at by a few dirtied kangaroos

heat twists into mirage, breath frying forests  
she-oaks shedding needles cones, a sound  
shuffling above, blistering  
sands grinding, patches of pain lingering  
my cr---y  
is dr---y

I do not have a wife on this sunburnt ground  
all my life I have been drifting  
from the thirsty outside to the thirsty inside  
from the itching hands to the itching feet

as the earth that turns by itself  
my days turn by themselves  
I  
cannot cry

for this land too is my flesh  
for this land too is my life

I cannot rebel against it  
as I could not rebel against my homeland

time presides  
a charcoaled grass-tree remains standing  
stubborn as stupefied, against the blue

## LI FROM MAINLAND CHINA

Li from mainland China is again crackling with laughter on the  
phone

I look out of the panel door  
my happiness like a boxing champion wearing his white cloud  
gloves  
wildly hitting a vast expanse of purified blue

Li from mainland China is again crackling with laughter on the  
phone

he used to be considered a symbol of mainland Chinese  
speaking like an old creaking windmill  
cheeks lips frowning tightened like a ploughing buffalo  
every persevering step loaded with vicissitudes of Chinese history

Li from mainland China is again crackling with laughter on the  
phone

the fake hand in my hand like a shower sprinkler  
releases sprinkles of joy  
the wires swelling up now and then into a hose  
the cracked wrinkles the bored pores the dried holes  
all of them begin to hail clapping with splashing

Li from mainland China is again crackling with laughter on the  
phone

I as a poet from mainland China can sit still no more  
I want to write of him I want to record him  
as I want to write and record an assured turn of Chinese history  
as I want to write and record  
the death and resurrection of a nation in an alien but new land

## COCKATOOS

a troop of shrill cries stopped our conversation  
Pauline with a listening expression spontaneously said parrots

I went out from the verandah  
and saw a huge crowd of blanched birds  
flying high in the dark sky  
springy notes trilled up my mind

Rod down there in jeans calmly said cockatoos  
without raising his head from his barbecue  
as if he knew them like knowing pets

I was stirred up though I didn't know what cockatoos were  
nor did I know how to spell the word  
I was just enthralled, agog, my mood  
spreading under the enormous height of darkness

shining like stars  
their crystalline lights  
pierced the silence of the universe

## WATERING

each morning I pick up the hose  
as I have touched the blood vessel of Perth

each morning I turn on the tap  
as I have felt the pulsation of Perth

each morning I sprinkle the plants  
saliva waters my mouth

each morning I see the plants green  
I begin to cherish each of my breaths

each morning I stand or stoop by them  
I feel my life has again and again risen from death

## THE LAST NIGHT OF 1995

precious child  
the earthly night is in the revelry of flesh  
it is the darkest of human age  
hold fast to your Father

precious child  
the earthly night is in the howl of ghosts  
it is the darkest of human times  
hold fast to your Father

or  
nightmares will grab you  
or  
you will not be able  
to flee from the grip  
of the devil

o precious child  
hold fast to your Father  
for He is the source of your life  
for He is the prop of your life  
for He is the light of your life

precious child  
hold fast to your Father  
hold fast  
and you will not sleep in fear  
even if  
the earthly night is in the darkest time

## PERSONAL RELIGION

twice a day he used to pray  
spending his gift thinking of the way  
God might appear above his head  
or convincing himself  
God was there

but at eighteen when he found  
he was so depending in his prayer  
not at all like a man  
he was scared

and turned to Buddhism  
emptying God  
from his mind  
like emptying a dustbin

he felt good

his mind, ever since, was set on nothing  
but was on everything  
he married  
as there was no way out  
like his birth  
he divorced  
as there was no way out  
like his death

he laughed  
where he was expected to mourn  
he wept  
where he was expected to rejoice

he was totally himself  
freed from every bondage  
like Jehovah he would claim  
I am what I am

and now he felt satisfied  
as if he really was  
what he was

## DOUBLE DREAM AT MOUNT SINAI

in the cool of night  
down there I reclined  
on the dried-up river-bed  
my head against a water trough  
stars in clusters with flaky fluff  
falling upon me as dew

having been robbed by a monkey  
of my only cloak  
I was left with nothing to cover me  
no shelter from the chilly  
and melting disk  
of the shrinking moon

unawares  
like Job I sighed in tears  
but just then arose a wind  
softly I was picked up  
and carried into the cleft  
of a crag very steep

where I was seated like a baby  
and saw the back of the Lord  
passing by  
dark and brilliant  
with splendour and glory

amazed I woke up later  
fumbling for the staff  
which had once struck out water  
from the rock of belief  
and despised every earthly power

yet now it stood at a distance  
far in the wandering wilderness  
as the stump of death  
in spite of branches barren  
of leaves and green



sweetened my mind with a breath

not until then did the day break  
a day of faith awake

## MORNING DREAM

the twitter of birds  
the glitter  
by a cluster  
of stars

## WALKING OUT OF THE WOUND

in the sun  
a wound opens my thought  
I stray  
into the tree shadow  
my foot-steps paddling  
against the glittering  
flow  
of the unknown

the wound  
enlarges  
into a dried-up well  
I turn off into a lane  
there I meet a stranger  
he raises a hand to hi  
a familiar face  
a smile buds  
on mine

the wound  
is two thousand years old  
yet always looks  
newly pricked open  
blood still flowing  
along the spear

I walk up home  
see somebody there  
resembling the stranger  
or the acquaintance  
lift up the wound  
as a jar  
drinking  
like a soldier

## MOON FLOWER

when dawn slowly opens on the wall  
I see a hand shaped like a kangaroo paw  
describing the visual and gradual  
blooming of a moon flower

when dawn slowly opens on the wall  
the feast of last night now in my stomach  
begins to smell

and my memories like the fragrance of my soul  
begin to recall  
the fully blossomed moon flower  
quaking in the wind  
cool as pale

when dawn opens on the wall  
the imminence of some death I begin to feel  
not the moon flower only  
but all earthly beauty  
is soon to fall

## IN THE HILLS

flow flow  
the joyous sounds  
of the stream  
riding ridging racing

my eyes open  
cobbles pebbles  
egg-shaped  
are seen  
fresh and frail  
as newly hatched

flow flow  
the joyous sounds  
of the stream  
lashing washing my brain  
words thoughts  
now are but sands

my eyes close  
but open in a vision  
wondering  
where it is  
that all creations are glistening  
pure and clean  
as newly born

flow flow  
the joyous sounds  
of the stream  
fragrance is echoing  
my life is following

## AUSTRALIAN NIGHT

an enormously long granite table just placed  
under the moon-flower decked veranda splendoured  
with contemporary limelight and ancient torches

an enormously long granite table just matted  
seats them like an audience watching  
fits of wind crossing over time ephemeral and time eternal  
with their shirts and blouses bulging  
appetite alighting

an enormously long granite table just centred  
with gigantic plates of fresh seafood and bricky bread  
bottles of wine white yellow brown and red  
dotted like a blessed game of chess

an enormously long granite table just gleaming  
with forks knives plates glasses clicking  
into frail echoes of sparkling tingling lights

an enormously long granite table  
like the Swan River carrying them far to the tales of night  
the new moon rocking a canoe of cleansed light  
over the billowing Indian Ocean

## 成 长

### 一个唯物主义者的自白

小时候总感到  
水会痛  
鱼会哭  
布娃娃会伤心  
甚至手表  
也会同情  
如今长大了  
终于被引导着相信  
一切都是物  
一切都供人享用  
甚至包括  
人本身

The subject of this ironic and satiric poem is hedonism. The poem begins with an account of the protagonist's childhood ingenuousness: he used to believe that water could suffer pain, doors feel sorrow, a watch could have sympathy, even a fish could shed tears. In adulthood, finally 'grown up', he finds that the material world is considered to exist only as the object of man's emotions. And this includes, ironically, the ultimate act of hedonism, man's enjoyment of himself.

Glen Phillips

## THE POET IN SPRING

now the fog  
is scattering  
wisps of words  
and sounds

disclosing  
now and then  
a lonely pen  
lying at the window  
of a sticky dream

## AN ELDERLY BACHELOR

a butterfly  
alights lily-white  
on your foot  
her wings waving  
in the wind  
lowering opening  
fan-shaped now  
like the long white skirt  
your daughter holds out  
on her both sides in a photo  
the tissue of the wings  
tender delicate  
as your daughter

a butterfly  
alights lily-white  
on your foot  
strikes you satisfied  
as if you had a daughter

## 都 市

(1)

夜  
高耸的酒楼  
像庞然矗立的尸首

挂起的血管  
布满穴位闪光  
而成串的  
流动

一个智慧的民族  
用欲望的舌尖  
舔亮  
成套的房

(2)

被掏空的夜  
剩下两只舔净的碟  
光体般  
瘫摆在窗前

晨

(3)

晨  
干巴巴的眼睛  
望着倒挂梦外的鱼

珠江的灵  
奶牛般  
蠕行在水上

隐隐作痛的波浪  
掀起乳头的  
荡漾

(4)

晨  
报纸翻动  
梦幻阵阵碎裂的脆响

油墨的芬芳  
散发蚊子  
茹毛饮血的  
旧闻

(5)

窗外  
嫩绿的芽  
如啄  
缀满神经的枝上

哑寂的凝望  
无力啄破  
孕育的  
春

## METROPOLITAN

These five short poems use the modern city both as a metaphor for the human body and the state of the nation.

- (1) The new hotels tower in the city like huge corpses, the blood vessels exposed and marbled with their glittering acupuncture points. In a myriad rooms couples are lit up with titillations of sex. The poem concludes with the deeply ironic comment: 'a nation of ancient wisdom'!
- (2) This city glimpse is Eliot-like in its imagist presentation of a barren apartment with two plates licked clean after a meal, bleak as the brazen shaft of light through the window. Night in the city is itself as exhausted as this scene of ennui.
- (3) In the third poem of the series we are shown the same riverfront city in the harshness of morning, when a restaurant customer's eyes have glazed from gaping, not at the images of this waker's dreams, but at a gigantic misshapen fish suspended in an aquarium. The spirit form incarnate of the Pearl River? the poet wryly asks. But it is reduced in its wriggling to a clumsy cow-like form. The pain of morning is compared to the shuddering of dangling breasts.
- (4) This fourth poem continues with the subject of morning in the city, turning to newspapers whose headlines present alternative pronouncements of doom to those which haunted night-time dreams - especially the nation state's version of 'the news'. The columns of printed characters are compared to trails made by blood-sucking mosquitoes.
- (5) Finally, the fifth of these brief glimpses of the city turns our gaze through the window to a street tree struggling to break out in green buds. These nodding buds, like beaks, utter muffled sounds from twigs which resemble a network of nerves. In turn, the tree and the viewer are silent, muted, seemingly trapped in the imprisoning shell of both intellect and the reluctantly arriving season.

Glen Phillips

## MORNING

in the basin  
two fishes  
head to head  
anchored  
in meditation

## TREES BY THE ROADS OF GUANGZHOU DURING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

each tree hanged a shadow  
each tree hanged a soul

each tree was a witness  
each tree was helpless

each tree was tossed  
each tree was questioned

each tree shed leaves  
each tree shed tears

each tree was a victim  
each tree was a tombstone



**YOUR SMILE IS A TEMPLE**  
for Laurie

dear brother, in this earthly world  
whenever I see your smile  
I feel I am in a temple  
sensing the love from God

you are dark square and tall  
according to the Scottish tale  
are most welcomed by any household  
as a new year's fortune candidate

yet you as usual just chuckled  
even if you were seriously told  
your casual joy was a betrayal:  
everything is but a sign or a symbol

except the love from God  
which is real and substantial  
which your life is proving and has proved  
visible capable and tangible

dear brother, for me it is a call  
set apart from this lusty world  
dear brother, for me it is a pull  
set apart from this selfish world

dear brother, from your face cheerful  
I have been once again revealed  
if our love comes from God  
it is definitely easy and simple

**MOON FESTIVAL**

the moon awoke in my dream  
a deathly whole was broken  
glowing in the darkness of union  
pure light bursting with a coloured rim

the moon awoke in my dream  
a white lotus was resting close  
so beauty's associations quietly arose  
which like beauty but a gleam

the moon awoke in my dream  
I got up remembering every single thing  
and penned it down just wondering  
whether I was to use or make a custom

the moon awoke in my dream  
where I did not see my body  
but I knew for sure it was and would be  
though it might take a different form

the moon awoke in my dream  
I was not there below as I am  
and now my bedlamp it has become  
lighting as before my staring up at home

## MIND IN WINTER

freckled maple leaves  
miniature frayed flags  
flap up there showing  
winter is to win

the hardened stone benches in the park  
long long we gawk  
are not foolish enough  
to sit there for a cough

in the bar hangs a lamp  
its light as thawing  
we turn round with a gape  
looking up at the Kingdom of Heaven  
which was once heard  
to be prevailing over the world

believe or not  
night is cold everywhere  
wind frosting footprints  
puffs of our breath in the air  
steam our vision and hands

where can we go in this season  
to enter our desires frozen  
our anxieties iced

and come out  
our souls made white as snow  
our sin cleansed as wool  
so that we have a mind in winter  
to await spring?

## FOR SALE

Perth is for sale  
its land is for sale  
its water is for sale  
its shops are for sale  
its houses are for sale  
its banks are for sale  
its hospitals are for sale  
its museums are for sale  
its universities are for sale

Perth is for sale  
its penis is for sale  
its vagina is for sale  
its wombs are for sale  
its breasts are for sale  
its flesh is for sale  
its hips are for sale  
its lips are for sale  
its soul is for sale

Perth is for sale  
nothing cannot be sold in Perth  
nothing does not have a price

Perth is for sale  
everywhere is empty  
everywhere is full  
goods goods goods  
merchandise merchandise  
is carried everywhere

Perth is for sale  
Perth is a purse  
for sale

CENTRE

I throw a pebble into the pool  
rousing  
a ripple

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